

# "A Tale of Two Bengals"

MANISHA GANGOPADHYAY

**A**LTHOUGH the world has a lot to learn about Bangladesh, within Bangladesh, the sense of identity is strong. In Kolkata, that distinction is not so clear.

When I first heard the account of one Bangladeshi's (Jamal *phupa*) experience in Kolkata, I was outraged. "They don't even speak Bangla there. They're all Hindi-speaking." I wondered, has this person ever ventured out of the hi-fi shopping area of Park Street? My trips to see uncles and aunts in Behala and the villages of Sonarpur have shown me otherwise. Most of my relatives cannot speak Hindi, though they understand it from years of watching Hindi films. But Jamal *phupa* had a point; Kolkata culture is infused with foreign influences.

A friend of mine told me that Bangladesh suffers from an identity crisis. "We don't know whether we are Muslim or Bangali, secular or non-secular; most of our history comes from a time when we were part of another country. We don't know what we are." From my experiences over the past year in Bangladesh, I have found a very different reality. Many people are very aware of their identity as both Muslim and Bangali, secular and not secular.

But in Kolkata, which has large



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percentages of distinct cultural groups from other parts of India, one cannot be both a Marwari and Chinese, Christian and Hindu, South Indian and North Indian, unless of mixed parentage. Depending on which market one goes to, one can be addressed in Hindi, English, Bangla or Chinese. Bangali culture is affected by a sense of being one of many that make a whole. Bangla pride takes a backseat to Indian pride.

Kolkata society is infiltrated with the flashy culture of MTV and Hollywood inspired Hindi-films. With the bur-